



News Release

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CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SEEKS PUBLIC HELP FOR WEST NILE VIRUS SURVEILLANCE

SACRAMENTO – The California Department of Health Services (CDHS) today asked the public to become part of its extensive monitoring effort for West Nile virus (WNV) by reporting any crows, ravens, magpies and jays that may have been dead for less than 24 hours. The bird should show no signs of decomposition or maggot infestation.

Although WNV has not been detected in California and no human cases have been reported in the state, CDHS has an extensive monitoring system for the virus that has spread westward as far as Iowa since it was first seen in New York in 1999. In 2001, 66 cases of WNV infection in humans were reported in the United States.

The tissue of dead birds is tested for the presence of WNV, which was most often identified first in dead birds, especially crows in the 27 Eastern and Midwestern states where the virus has been confirmed.

WNV is transmitted to humans and animals through a mosquito bite. Mosquitoes become infected when they feed on infected birds. WNV is not transmitted from person to person and there is no evidence that an individual can get the virus from handling live or dead infected birds.

CDHS has established a toll-free line -- 877-WNV-BIRD – for public reporting.

"We are asking the public's help because we want to use every available method to identify and act on the presence of this virus as soon as possible to protect the people of California," said State Health Director Diana M. Bontá, R.N., Dr.P.H.

A comprehensive surveillance program to monitor for WNV was established by CDHS in collaboration with the University of California, Davis, California Department of Food and Agriculture, local mosquito and vector control districts and other state and local agencies. The system includes testing suspect cases in horses and humans, capturing and testing mosquitoes, testing sentinel chickens and evaluating dead birds. Approximately 200 flocks of sentinel chickens at sites throughout the state are tested every two weeks for the presence of the virus.

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Individuals who find sick or dead birds should not attempt to catch or handle them. Individuals should take note of the bird's location and its condition before calling 877-WNV-BIRD for further instructions, including assistance with identifying the type of bird found. Information about WNV is available on the Web site established for West Nile virus surveillance in California <http://www.westnile.ca.gov/>

Most individuals who are infected with WNV have only mild symptoms such as fever, headache and body aches. However, WNV can be severe in the elderly and individuals with lowered immune systems. Individuals can reduce their risk of mosquito-borne diseases by taking these precautions:

- Avoid activity outside when mosquitoes are most active, especially at dawn and dusk.
- When outdoors, wear long pants, long sleeve shirts and other protective clothing and apply insect repellent according to label instructions.
- Keep infants indoors during peak mosquito hours.
- When outside, cover cribs, bassinets or playpens with suspended mosquito netting.
- Eliminate all sources of standing water around your property that can support mosquito breeding.

For more mosquito control information and to report unusual mosquito activity, contact your local mosquito and vector control district.

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